

A culpable CALP: Rethinking the conversational/academic language proficiency distinction in early literacy instruction

The distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency may no longer be useful in dealing with young English-language learners. Some things that teachers can do to help students learn English are suggested.

When his kindergarten teacher asked the class for the first sound in the word *made*, Joaquín (except where noted, all names are pseudonyms) seemed to know what he was doing. He independently segmented the word aloud (“/m/, /a/, /d/”) with no problem. But then he gave his answer: “/d/.” Joaquín, a second-language learner of Mexican heritage, knew how to segment sounds, but he did not understand what his teacher meant by “the first sound,” and so answered incorrectly.

Among young English-language learners (ELLs), such struggles are not uncommon, and have long been attributed to a lack of the necessary English skills for coping with the kind of academic language used in school. More than 25 years ago, Jim Cummins, a prominent researcher of second-language acquisition and bilingualism, proposed a framework that has become a widely accepted explanation of how children like Joaquín, who appear to get by quite well in conversational English, nonetheless struggle when they need to use it for academic purposes (Cummins, 1979).

Cummins (1979, 1994, 2000) has argued that children typically develop informal “playground” talk—or *basic interpersonal communication skills* (BICS)—sooner and more easily than they develop skills to cope with the cognitively demanding language they are expected to understand and use to complete academic tasks—what he terms *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP). If students do not have CALP in *either* their native language *or* the new language, they may be at a special academic disadvantage, according to Cummins. Joaquín’s teacher, Ms. Piper, felt this described his situation pretty well. In her view, his lack of familiarity with important concepts in either English or Spanish made school especially hard for him. She explained, “Joaquín is sort of caught in this trap of, he doesn’t have enough Spanish or English, so that he’s just going to be...sort of limited bilingual unless his Spanish gets promoted to a strong language.”

There was a time I also relied on Cummins’s framework, which was taught in many of my education courses and appeared to explain why some of my young ELL students were struggling. But I am no longer convinced that the BICS/CALP framework helps us understand ELL students as well as we need to. In fact, given how it is often interpreted, I believe it may do a disservice to children like Joaquín by categorizing them as unready to learn.

Rather than blaming the academic difficulties many ELLs experience on something *they* are said to lack—mastery of the “right” kind of language—I propose that we educators need to consider what

we have often lacked in meeting their needs. ELL children have the tough job of figuring out what they are being asked to do by their teachers, and they can best make sense of that through *recontextualizing* activities and ideas in school, that is, by making sense of what they are learning through the lens of what is already familiar, by themselves actively creating a unique context for what is new to them out of their multiple, infinitely varied experiences in other situations. Drawing a line between something considered to be BICS (seen as of little use in the classroom), and something considered to be CALP (seen as prerequisite to academic success), can easily work against the fundamentally creative endeavor of this kind of learning. This article explains why, and offers a framework rooted in recontextualization (Dyson, 1999, 2003) that can better help us think about teaching ELLs.

What is CALP?

Cummins proposed that learning “from experience and action” is substantially different from learning that takes place “from texts and teachers” (Cummins, 2000, p. 65), because the latter relies heavily on the use of *decontextualized* language: “language used in ways that eschew reliance on shared social and physical contexts in favour of reliance on a context created through the language itself” (C.E. Snow, 1991, cited in Cummins, 2000, p. 64). In other words, in decontextualized language, there is no shared social context that one can rely upon in figuring out what something means, or what one should say. (Although I do not believe decontextualized language exists, as I explain below, I use the term throughout this article to mean what Cummins would see as decontextualized language.) Cummins (2000) generally yoked together decontextualized language with what he termed *cognitively demanding* (hard to understand) language: In short, the decontextualized, cognitively demanding language used in school is CALP, whereas the contextualized, cognitively undemanding language picked up through familiar interactions, gestures, and tone of voice is BICS.

Joaquín, for example, had no difficulty making requests to the teacher (“Can I play on the computer?”) or addressing his peers (“You wanna play?”). Cummins would consider these to be ex-

amples of Joaquín’s BICS. And yet, he struggled with figuring out what Ms. Piper meant by “the first sound in *made*,” and once stopped in mid-sentence because he could not remember the word *strawberry*, which figured prominently in the book he was talking about. Cummins would likely consider these difficulties emblematic of Joaquín’s lack of English CALP.

Cummins (2000) suggested that the distinction between BICS and CALP reflects a pattern of language development that also exists in native English speakers. Between an English-speaking 6-year-old in Joaquín’s class and a 12-year-old at a nearby middle school, we might observe only minimal differences in surface features of their talk—both could chat fluently about favorite TV shows, or argue compellingly about who got the bigger slice of cake. But we would expect enormous differences in their vocabulary and ability to use academic language. Even kindergarteners doing well in Ms. Piper’s class would struggle with material taught in the sixth-grade class where Joaquín’s big brother was a student, for example.

These differences appear transparent when describing children of such different ages. But Cummins (2000) proposed that like-aged children (such as the 20 kindergarteners in Joaquín’s class) do not all come to school with equivalent CALP levels either. In kindergarten, children often encounter book language that is different from what they use with parents or one another, like *once upon a time*. Kindergarteners are also expected to understand explanations and directions that are quite abstract: “the first sound in *made*,” for instance. Some children have had experiences prior to schooling that make such language comprehensible, particularly if their native language matches the school language. But when children such as Joaquín have insufficient CALP in the language of instruction, they will struggle in school (Cummins, 1994) even if they display BICS.

The positive legacy of BICS/CALP

When introduced, Cummins’s (1979) theory represented a step forward in pedagogical thinking about ELLs. Rather than students like Joaquín being written off as stupid, the BICS/CALP framework gave educators a way of talking about how language learning might figure into children’s scholastic

difficulties: Although Ms. Piper believed that some students (perhaps those with serious cognitive disabilities) might never be able to function academically at the level of their peers, “I don’t think that’s his case,” she said of Joaquín, despite what she saw as his difficulties with academic English.

Another contribution of the BICS/CALP framework has been to foster greater recognition of the importance of developing the native language. Instead of seeing English and Spanish development as separate (and perhaps conflicting) goals, Cummins (2000) argued that, when CALP gets developed in the native language, it easily transfers to a second language. Thus, he is a strong supporter of bilingual education, the effectiveness of which has been documented in a range of studies (see Rolstad, Mahoney, & Glass, 2005). It is easy to see what he means by transfer of CALP from the native to the second language—if Joaquín understood the concept of “first sound in a word” in Spanish, it would help him grasp what was being asked of him when confronted with a similar task in English.

How do we measure CALP?

Although Cummins’s framework has intuitive explanatory appeal, several scholars have questioned it. If CALP is defined as “expertise in understanding and using literacy-related aspects of language” (Cummins, 2000, p. 70), CALP may be nothing more than “test-wiseness” (Edelsky, 1996, p. 74), the ability to do well on tests that measure literacy-related aspects of language. A student who does well on the tests is said to have CALP, and a student said to have CALP is one who does well on the things that get tested. The description may be accurate, but I (along with Edelsky) question whether the CALP designation itself tells us anything pedagogically useful about the child in question. Content knowledge and language knowledge are so intertwined that some linguists have argued that tests that attempt to measure “pure” language either start looking like non-language or are actually measuring content knowledge alongside language (L.F. Bachman, in Olson, 2002; see also Pray, 2005).

Yet, language proficiency tests are often taken very seriously by teachers. Joaquín’s teacher drew heavily on her ELL students’ scores on the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey (1993) at the

beginning of the year. The WMLS provides a Spanish and English CALP classification based on tasks such as identifying vocabulary (e.g., the child must point to “a bowl of soup” among several picture choices); recognizing letters and picture relationships (e.g., matching a cartoon sketch to a realistic picture of a dog); and writing (e.g., copying a circle; writing an *s*).

Joaquín’s oral ability on the English test was pegged as “very limited;” his skills in reading and writing were “negligible.” But what worried Ms. Piper most were his equally low Spanish scores. Ms. Piper, who was European American and did not speak Spanish herself, acknowledged that the assessed skills were likely to be unfamiliar (“I mean, this is the fall of kindergarten”), but nonetheless concluded that Joaquín was academically hampered by limited CALP in English *and* in Spanish.

MacSwan, Rolstad, and Glass (2002) analyzed a similar test, the Pre-Language Assessment Scales—Español (1994), that is commonly used to measure Spanish proficiency among young children. These researchers found significant problems with the way the test was constructed, including lack of sensitivity to dialectal differences. For example, concepts like *soup* or *frying pan* go by different names in different Spanish-speaking regions and countries, putting some students at a disadvantage even though they know the concept. Even monolingual students do not necessarily perform well on language proficiency tests. Indeed, one study with intermediate-grade native English speakers representing varied socioeconomic backgrounds found that 60% of them would receive a “negligible or “very limited” CALP designation in spoken English on the WMLS, and none at all tested as fluent in English (Pray, 2005).

Bilingual students may be at a particular disadvantage. Because young bilinguals tend to use the different languages they know in distinct ways, such assessments routinely underestimate what these children can do across *both* language domains by considering each language as if it independently measured a child’s conceptual knowledge (Kester & Pena, 2002). For example, if a child knew the names of food items like *soup* in Spanish, but the names of classroom items like *desk* in English, a test that required a child to identify both food and classroom items would make the child appear to have limited

CALP in both languages even if all assessed items were concepts familiar to the child.

Such problems led MacSwan et al. (2002) to call for an end to routine testing of students' oral native language proficiency, because of the danger that students will be needlessly "remediated," receiving inappropriate instruction because of a "non-proficient" designation in a language they speak very well. To the extent that language assessments do continue to play a role, they should be recognized as a limited indicator, not as an accurate means of identifying a discrete ability level.

In Joaquín's case, his strengths in a number of linguistic areas—for example, his ability to talk about stories in Spanish or to segment sounds in English words—often went unrecognized, perhaps partly because they did not mesh with his teacher's view of his assessed CALP. In another study, Cummins and Miramontes (1989) examined the language use of four bilingual students who, like Joaquín, were identified by teachers as lacking "concepts needed for academic work in either language" (p. 444). They found that all four could effectively manipulate language for academic and social purposes, but because teachers perceived the students' abilities as limited, their instruction was tailored to that perception. The students struggled, not due to a lack of CALP, but because classroom tasks typically lacked "the essential element of relevance that characterized the situations in which students displayed their greatest competencies" (Cummins & Miramontes, 1989, p. 467).

This is certainly not what Cummins intended when he proposed his BICS/CALP framework. However, when CALP is narrowly defined, it inevitably obscures many facets of what children can do. On the other hand, unless we define CALP and BICS in narrow ways, they become slippery, unstable concepts that vary by individual and by context. Simoes (1992) pointed out that, because he (as a researcher) knows little about farming, a farmer's language would be CALP to him (very demanding)—even though it would be BICS (very simple) for the farmer (see also MacSwan, 2000). In kindergarten, a child who spends time in buses and subway trains might find discussing means of transport easy (BICS), but another child without such experiences would find the same discussion quite cognitively challenging (CALP). And yet, the second child might know far more than the first

about animals, hospitals, or fairy tales. Is it fair—or useful—to say one has more CALP?

Collapsing the BICS/CALP distinction

What might be seen as BICS is not always so basic or cognitively undemanding. Ms. Piper frequently reminded her students, "You need to use your words" to solve interpersonal disputes, instead of them slapping or pushing each other when upset. For the children, finding those words was not always easy. Even as adults who do not push and shove, the social realm can place high cognitive demands on us. Knowing what to say to a friend ill with cancer or responding when a loved one makes a questionable decision can be challenging.

Conversely, what counts as academic language is an utterly social phenomenon, as Scribner and Cole's (1981) study of the Vai in Liberia has illustrated. They found that literacies in different languages (Vai, Arabic, and English) within the same community were associated with different cognitive skills, and neither Vai nor Arabic literacy predicted performance on tasks we usually associate with schooling. Because the Vai used different languages to accomplish different things (letter writing, reading religious texts), their CALP in one language did not neatly map onto CALP in another.

Cummins (2000) agreed that what we think of as cognitive abilities are socioculturally shaped. But if we take that notion seriously, it problematizes a central claim he makes, namely that many ELLs come to school less prepared to cope with cognitively demanding academic tasks (Cummins & Swain, 1986). If literacies vary crossculturally, children are likely to "acquire knowledge, skills, and values associated with the specific literacy practices of their home and other early social environments" (Reder, 1994, p. 40). Heath's (1983) study of English-speaking children in three communities in the Piedmont area of North and South Carolina found that home literacy practices varied greatly by community; for instance, middle class children had more experience with the kinds of questions teachers often ask in school.

Just because home literacy practices differ does not mean that children from minority cultural or linguistic backgrounds come to school with less of

some broad universal skill that would make them ready to read. It is more appropriate to address how schools are less prepared to handle children with non-mainstream “ways with words” (Heath, 1983, p. 24). Indeed, by rearranging instruction to better match children’s linguistic strengths (rather than expecting the students to simply adapt to the existing language of the school), teachers in Heath’s (1983) study were able to substantially improve their students’ academic performances.

CALP is no less dependent on social norms and interactions than BICS. Demonstration of cognitive skills relies on social competence in the kinds of interactions expected in school (Genishi & Dyson, 1984; Johnson, 1995). Joaquín often enacted mock assassinations on the reading corner carpet during read-alouds, and spontaneously segmented sounds in words in the middle of classroom activities unrelated to phonemic segmentation. His penchant for “distracting himself and others,” as Ms. Piper described it, no doubt figured into the extent to which she saw him as an “immature, unmotivated, poorly skilled” student.

If academic language is inevitably social, and everyday language is cognitively demanding, then the BICS/CALP distinction seems decidedly fragile. But what of that other continuum, between contextualized and decontextualized language? Snow, Tabors, Nicholson, and Kurland (1995) described decontextualized oral language skills as “the ability to sustain talk about the world beyond the here and now” (p. 38); they argued that such skills are prerequisites to school success and “may give more information about [young children’s] academic futures than traditionally assessed skills in the domains of letter, shape, color, and number knowledge, or than print-related assessments” (p. 47).

I would propose that language always refer to a “here and now” as well as being linked to “there and then,” because language is always about doing something with words (Austin, 1962) within a particular context. Even very young children can talk about things not present. I recently observed a 20-month-old girl, excited about time spent on a farm, repeatedly telling a 3-year-old stranger in a hospital lobby: “Cows!” Needless to say, no cows were in the hospital. But the ability to sustain the talk, to have it deemed relevant, invariably depends on the here and now, and on how both the child and those around her or him understand that here and

now. To treat language as though it can exist—much less be assessed or learned—devoid of context is missing the point.

Indeed, adults rely on text cues (such as illustrations on book jackets) and extra-textual context (such as prior knowledge) to guide their reading, re-contextualizing what might be considered decontextualized (Edelsky, 1996). Joaquín did this, too. When Ms. Piper pulled out *Hop on Pop* (Seuss, 1963) for a read-aloud, Joaquín immediately began talking about a book where the “little kid do something” and “the momma come.” Joaquín was linking this book to *The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1957); when Ms. Piper realized this, she pulled out the other Seuss book so students could connect the two.

Finding language meaningful, making sense of it, always involves situating that language vis-à-vis other experiences and what others have said. No text, and no spoken word, ever exists without a context. This holds true even for assessments that appear to demand “context-free” engagement with the material. For example, I recall asking a girl to read a list of high-frequency words as a test. She paused after reading the first few. Although she had read most words correctly, she appeared frustrated, and blurted out, “That don’t make no sense!” She expected the words to be connected, to form a story: The idea that someone would just plop down random words on a page seemed ridiculous. To be successful with the test, she needed to understand that the test-maker’s ideas about what belonged on a page did not align with her own.

In the discussion of *Hop on Pop*, Ms. Piper recognized the connection Joaquín was making to a previous experience, but children make such linkages even when teachers do not understand their attempts, or deem them inappropriate—as might have happened had Ms. Piper heard Joaquín during buddy reading of *We Go Out* (Randell, Giles, & Smith, 1996). When he and his partner came to a page about swimming, the other boy tried to read the one-line text, which read: “We go to the pool.” But Joaquín pointed in the accompanying photo to a middle-aged woman in a bathing suit, perhaps the mother of two children in the pool. “Very beautiful,” he said, giggling. Of course, that did not help him meet his teacher’s expectations for the activity, to read the words on the page. But he was placing what he was reading in a context with which he was already familiar.

I argue that if a teacher says that a child does not understand decontextualized language, what she or he really means is that the child understands the context in a given way and is operating under a different set of assumptions about what the context is. But context remains critically important, which is why the term *decontextualized language* is so misleading. The term puts the onus on the child to function within the adult's sense of what the linguistic context is without acknowledging that understanding of the context is at stake.

Children gain familiarity with language and literacy not as a consequence of mastering material presented "without a context," but rather as they become increasingly proficient at identifying, creating, and expanding linguistic (and extralinguistic) contexts. They do this in conversation with others, including teachers and peers, through whom new contexts for reading and writing, for speaking and thinking, acquire meaning. Understanding academic language without understanding the demands of the context does a child little good.

Consider, for instance, what happened later during Ms. Piper's read-aloud of *Hop on Pop* (Seuss, 1963). After she read "We like to hop on top of Pop" (p. 40), Joaquín repeated, "Hop on Dad, hop on Dad, hop on Dad." Even after Ms. Piper explained that "Dad" was called "Pop" in this story, he persisted with "Hop on Dad." Joaquín understood the book's language, even the rather obscure term "Pop." But *Joaquín's* context for the read-aloud was making sense of what was going on by repeating it in terms with which he was more familiar, and *Ms. Piper's* purpose was having students pick out rhyming words. It was not any "lack of CALP" that made him unsuccessful in calling out rhyming words like his peers were doing. Rather, it was that he saw the book reading to be about meaning-making (not unreasonable, given previous read-alouds), although Ms. Piper expected the children's primary focus to be on rhyming.

Joaquín frequently interpreted the context differently from Ms. Piper, not only during read-alouds, but also when attempting to follow her directions (another dimension of what is considered CALP), as in the following vignette.

Joaquín had been called to the front and asked to write the letter *m* (of the word *math*) on chart paper. Ms. Piper pointed to a lowercase example of the letter that Joaquín was to copy, but he used the red marker she

had handed him to make an uppercase *M*. Ms. Piper put correction tape over that *M*, and guided him on his second try, tracing the letter in the air with her finger as she told him: "Like this. So you go, this line (she used her finger to trace a vertical line), and then over and over (she traced the "humps" of the *m*). *M*." Rather than starting with a downward line, as Ms. Piper had modeled, Joaquín began his *m* by drawing a slightly bent vertical line from the bottom line up, saying, "Like this?" But Joaquín's red line pushed well beyond the horizontal middle line where it should have stopped, so it jugged way above other lowercase letters in the sentence. When she saw this happening, Ms. Piper said, "No taller, no taller!" to stop him from extending the line any higher. His marker paused obediently; he understood. She then traced "humps" of the *m* in the air with her finger again, saying, "Now go over and over." Joaquín produced the *m* in Figure 1. It did look something like an *m*, but the last leg was way too short. Ms. Piper provided validation for his attempt ("Yes, very nice!") before offering additional direction intended to get Joaquín to make the last leg of the *m* extend down to the bottom line: "Make it a little longer there." She pointed to the short leg of the *m*, where it needed to be lengthened. Joaquín, apparently eager to please, quickly added to his lopsided *m* as shown in Figure 2. He had made the *m* a little longer, just not in the way

FIGURE 1
Joaquín's original attempt at *m*

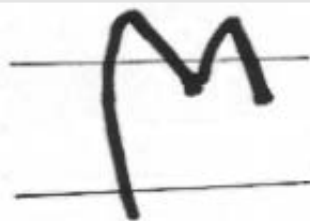


FIGURE 2
Joaquín's *m* after Ms. Piper tried to help him



Ms. Piper had been expecting. Her voice took on a slightly higher pitch as she called out, "Oh, no!" But she recovered quickly and added, in her customary tone of voice, "Okay. We make mistakes. That's what the [correction] tape is for."

Joaquín worked very hard to understand Ms. Piper's context for this activity. He sought out her guidance: "Like this?" And when she told him, "No taller," he correctly interpreted her message, and stopped making his *m* taller. But things fell apart when Ms. Piper asked him to "make it a little longer there." Why?

A lack of CALP does not explain the difficulty. It wasn't decontextualized language (i.e., following abstract instructions) that Joaquín had needed to understand; he did just as well with "a little longer" as he had done with "No taller!" He precisely followed Ms. Piper's directions and made his letter "a little longer" by adding the extra diagonal line. But Joaquín was making the whole *letter* longer, although his teacher wanted him to make the *line* in the letter longer. His understanding of the context for what she said was radically different from hers.

For Joaquín, it was not enough to know what "make it a little longer" means (as decontextualized language). He also needed to be able to situate "a little longer" within a new communicative context that his teacher took for granted. But Ms. Piper's response to Joaquín did little to illuminate their differing frames of reference; she interpreted him as misunderstanding. But, from his perspective, he *had* understood. Joaquín did not make "a mistake" from within his understanding of the context, and it was probably quite puzzling to him that Ms. Piper covered the "longer" part of his *m* with correction tape, when she had just told him he was *supposed* to make it longer. It is impossible to know for sure what Joaquín took away from this exchange, but because his sense of the context was not acknowledged, I question whether he learned much at all about letter formation, or even about the teacher's way of using language.

Replacing the BICS/CALP framework

Because there are situations in which an ELL child simply does not understand something said to

him or her (for example, when Joaquín was supposed to draw the rhyming pair *fox/box*, but did not appear to be familiar with the word *box*—"Bok?"), is it helpful in those cases to talk about decontextualized language? I would argue that it is not, because from the point of view of the child, no language that is comprehensible ever lacks a context. Language that is incomprehensible is precisely that language for which a sensible context cannot be found. (What could a "bok" be?) And context is always in some crucial sense about the already familiar—for a child, having a context for understanding depends precisely on what is considered to be BICS.

Thus, I believe it is ultimately destructive to view proficiency in decontextualized language as a prerequisite for successful participation in school. The term itself is a contradiction. Language *must* be in context, to be meaningful at all. Furthermore, CALP can easily be used to demarcate a pedagogical line in the sand—if a child does not have sufficient CALP, she or he cannot learn successfully. For Ms. Piper, it became a way of explaining Joaquín's struggles.

There's a lot of stuff where I know what I'm saying just is not even meeting the mark, so he doesn't know where to start. It doesn't give him an entrance point anymore, and here we are in kindergarten.

Although pedagogically adept in many ways, Ms. Piper felt she could do little but give Joaquín more time to develop his CALP, because she believed the "entrance point" to literacy was a kind of language that was beyond him. Ultimately, Joaquín was retained for another year in kindergarten.

An alternative: Recontextualization

I would turn CALP on its head and argue, instead, that it is through socially meaningful participation that children appropriate the language they need in order to fulfill a range of purposes, both academic and nonacademic. To do so, children must draw upon the linguistic resources that they already know—even, *especially*, ones that are not "academic"—and recontextualize and transform them in new contexts. Knowing what it means to be "first in line" becomes a way to begin thinking about the "first sound in *made*," for example. By "reconfig-

uring, rearranging, and rearticulating concrete symbolic stuff from one situated communicative situation to another” (Dyson, 2003, p. 180), each child continually recreates her or his own unique context-embedded academic language.

Children often undertake this recontextualization spontaneously, as Joaquín did when he made his *m* longer. But it is up to teachers to recognize that children’s existing frames of reference are the primary raw material for new learning, rather than some static predetermined academic language. When Ms. Piper pulled out *The Cat in the Hat* to respond to Joaquín’s talk about *Hop on Pop*, she was working with Joaquín to recontextualize the new book in terms of the familiar one.

Thus, when a child does not understand, the teacher needs to ask her- or himself what is not yet understood well enough about the child’s sense of the context for the teacher to help the child do the hard work of recontextualization. Pedagogically, there is no “prerequisite language” for success, no such thing as “not enough CALP.” One must only start from where each particular child is, and work from that place with the child to help new academic material become sensible and relevant, too.

Cummins himself has recognized that good teaching is context-embedded, not decontextualized. But because CALP-oriented instruction seeks to move students gradually away from context-embedded linguistic activities toward ever more decontextualized language use (Cummins, 2000), context is principally viewed as a temporary steppingstone on the way to serious academic learning. And context is considered primarily from the teacher’s point of view, as if it was transparent and meant just one thing to everybody, rather than being something that is figured out from multiple angles by different children. Teaching a second language is not a matter of putting new words into context, taken abstractly, but rather of uncovering ways that a particular child’s sense of a context might matter as she or he works to make sense of the unfamiliar language.

Before closing, then, I offer an example of such teaching, which involved a reading specialist working with a first grader of Guatemalan heritage (Adriana) who spoke Mam (a Mayan language) as her first language, some Spanish as a second language, and a little English as a third. The school’s reading program depended on English sound-

spelling cards posted in each classroom to help students master letter-sound correspondences in early reading. Some primary grade classrooms taught reading in Spanish, using analogous cards; Adriana was in one of these classrooms, but was referred to the reading specialist (Mr. Vélez, who has given permission for me to use his real name) for additional help. As he described it, she “was struggling with recalling, on the run, the letter-sound correspondences in Spanish. She was at a stage in her reading where mapping the sounds onto the symbols was not yet automatic.”

Mr. Vélez (fluent in Spanish, but not a Mam speaker) began by working with Adriana to discover pictures of words she already knew in Spanish. Together they came up with an individualized picture dictionary built around contexts with which Adriana was already familiar. For example, *D* was *dinero* (money); *M* was *mamá* (mom); *R* was *reloj* (clock), and *T* was *teléfono* (telephone). Adriana began to apply this knowledge in reading little books in Spanish. Instead of depending on the static context for learning letter sounds offered by the publisher’s sound-spelling cards, Mr. Vélez sought contexts in which reading was likely to be most sensible within Adriana’s existing frames of reference—and it worked.

But this is not the end of the story. After a few weeks in which Adriana appeared to be making great progress, Mr. Vélez was suddenly puzzled by a new kind of error she began making. When she encountered a *t* in a word—a letter with which she was familiar and had seemed to have under control—she made the /r/ sound. For several lessons, he was flummoxed by this development: he would discuss it with her, even point out the *r* in her name, but invariably she would read *t* with a /r/ sound the next time around. But then he noticed that she was looking up at the English sound-spelling cards posted on the wall, where a picture of a timer accompanied the letter *t*. That is, to Mr. Vélez it was a timer; to Adriana—when he asked her—it was a *reloj* (clock), not unlike the one in her picture dictionary. Adriana was recontextualizing—figuring out what sound the letter *t* needed to make on the basis of her sense of how to use letter-picture resources.

Maybe Adriana knew the concept of *timer* in Spanish or Mam; but it is quite possible that she did not, and was substituting a familiar concept instead. But it was not this “lack” that was holding

her back in reading. And it is highly unlikely that a discussion of the meaning of *timer*, on its own (as decontextualized language), would have helped much. Instead, upon noting the source of her confusion, Mr. Vélez told Adriana that the sound-spelling cards on the wall represented English concepts and sounds, and were applicable to English reading; her personal dictionary, by contrast, represented Spanish concepts and sounds. In this way, he explicitly acknowledged what was salient to her, and began with that existing understanding to explain how other ways of making use of available resources might be more useful to her in this case. In short, he suggested ways that her existing sense of the context could help her frame a new sense of it. And it seems Adriana understood. From then on, Mr. Vélez never saw her read the *t* with a /r/ sound again. By understanding Adriana's frame of reference, he helped her recontextualize, and thus refine, her use of the sound-spelling cards.

Bringing recontextualization to life

So what can teachers do to foster recontextualization in their classrooms? The following are some ideas to consider.

- Learn what you can about each child's language(s) and life experience, and make room for these.
- Embed new learning in *doing and talking* to which the children can already relate.
- Make sure classroom activities are relevant and purposeful, from the children's points of view. Vary them as necessary, remembering that different children will experience the same activity differently.
- Do not over-rely on any prepackaged curriculum—let the children guide you toward discovering what is and is not working.
- Listen closely, ask questions to help you understand, and observe each child carefully.
- Keep in mind that misunderstandings are *your* responsibility. How can you understand the child's sense of the context better, so you are less likely to misunderstand each other?

All of these are important, but one key premise underpins them all—we must value what children are doing. We must honor their frames of reference, and their efforts at recontextualization, even if we never fully understand these—and that can be very hard. But if we fail to acknowledge how children are already making sense of the world around them, and fail to put that at the core of what we teach, we may fail Joaquín and Adriana and a great many others by overlooking the resources they bring, creatively reinterpret, and attempt to make sensible in their reading and writing, believing these to be nothing more relevant or useful than a “mistake.” We cannot afford this failure, this mistake on *our* part.

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